

Drumming at the Edge of Magic and Planet Drum

By Mickey Hart



Reviewed by
David Thaxton

*"In the beginning was the drum."
—Carl Orff*

Drumming at the Edge of Magic and Planet Drum, written by

Grateful Dead drummer, Mickey Hart, and published nearly 20 years ago, offer more than just a technical view of the world's oldest instrument. Written as a set, each book fulfils a specific niche. *Drumming at the Edge of Magic* serves as the foundation of a semi-autobiographical and philosophical journey of a drummer seeking the roots of the ancient instrument and the spirit it brings from various cultures around the world. *Planet Drum* serves as a supplement, offering more depth to traditions and instruments, stories, and copious pictures.

Hart grew up in a culture, familiar to many of us, that had slowly divorced itself from the mystical properties of music, and instead had distilled it down into a precisely refined craft. This is poignantly illustrated in the author's account of his relationship with his estranged father. Though his father was absent throughout his childhood, Hart felt drawn by the noise, sound, and rhythm of the musical world of his father: a world-class, rudimental style drum corps master. Captivated by the only artifact he had of his missing father, a pair of snakewood drum sticks and a worn practice pad, Hart began his musician's journey as someone who loved creating rhythm from sound and noise—but not completely understanding why. After a stint as a drummer in the Air Force, he was able to track down his father and meet up with many of the charac-

ters who would play a role in drawing him into the Grateful Dead, and moreover, the mystical world of primal drumming traditions of the world.

Percussion is by far the most varied family of instruments, as well as the most universal. While an exhaustive study on every percussion instrument known to man would easily fill many volumes, the author has done an estimable job at providing an overview and insights into instruments that have direct links to the most ancient and primal roots, as well as a glimpse into why they have such power physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. Hart's explorations span from the giant slit gongs (log drums) of West Africa and their power to communicate over great distances, to Tibetan damarus, the most striking of which are made from human skulls and skin, and are intended to communicate with the dead. The author's brief possession of one such drum caused such grief and disturbance in his mind when he played it that he could not rest until a rightful owner was found. The owner warned, "I hope you have been most careful, Mickey Hart. This is a drum of great, great power. It wakes the dead, you know."

Beyond the examination of instruments that connect and communicate, Hart offers many contemplations of the use of ritual percussion and shamanic drums that serve as a means of transportation for the drummer/shaman to altered states of consciousness and beyond, to the world of the supernatural. By using these instruments, the author not only gives the reader an encyclopedic account of their origin, but also unique insights into how they may be used to summon the storyteller, dancer, dreamer, healer, mystic, and musician in those that play them and are moved by their sound beat and rhythm.

One may study music for years as a great technical endeavor, toiling over perfecting instrumental or vocal technique. Yet, it is such a rare opportunity to study with focus about why our minds and bodies entrain with a driving beat, why an extended rhythmic cycle can induce a trance-like state, or why a simple rhythmic pulse awakens something deeply primal



within us. Possessing both a foundation in drumming as a technical craft and a great longing to discover why percussion stirs at something so elemental in the human psyche, the author is in a unique position to explore the ancient and mystical drumming traditions around the world. His success playing with the Grateful Dead afforded him the means with which to follow the threads, and fortunately, he takes the reader along for an enlightening ride with a captivating read.

For Orff practitioners seeking the elemental nature of instruments, the drum is a logical place to begin. For exploring the primal interface of human and percussion, *Drumming at the Edge of Magic* and *Planet Drum* are the ideal places to start.

David Thaxton teaches pre-K through sixth grade at Donner Springs Elementary School in Reno, Nevada. He completed Levels I-III with Liz Gilpatrick and Judith Cole, and is past president of the Sierra Nevada AOSA and serves on The Orff Echo Editorial Board.

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